TRIBUTE TO PETER AWN

Good morning. I am honored to stand before you today to reflect on a beautiful, intelligent, and lovely man, Dean Peter J. Awn. I wish, first, to express my deep condolences to his family, and I hope that the knowledge of how well-loved Dean Awn was at Columbia provides some measure of consolation during this time of grief.

It would be impossible to ever accurately impart the breadth and depth of Dean Awn’s knowledge, or to communicate with you the impact that he had on students over a career spanning decades. And, unfortunately, there are not enough words in all of the many languages that Dean Awn knew, or in any other language besides, to convey his profound kindness and gentleness of spirit. Yet I will strive to do him justice.

If you will allow me, I would like first to take a brief look at a citation for an award he won in 1995, before he became Dean of the School of General Studies. It was the Great Teacher Award, and the citation says, in part:

“You embody the true spirit of the College’s half-century-old Literature Humanities course, showing the newest members of academe that long-dead poets live, that Homer’s theater is before their eyes. A witty and compelling lecturer, you also listen intently, giving the impression that knowledge is there inside each student, needing only your questioning to elicit. The centuries’ accretion of critical interpretation can wait for another day; for now, your students may simply read. You seem to say, “These books were written for you; they are your inheritance.”

These words beautifully capture how Dean Awn interacted with his students, guiding them through unfamiliar worlds, broadening their minds, and sharpening their intellects. He endeavored to help students to discover these beloved books, which were their inheritance. And within the course of this journey of discovery, he also helped students to unearth their own full intellectual and personal potential. This was his legacy.

As Dean of the School of General Studies, which he led for 20 years, Dean Awn expanded on this remarkable legacy. GS is an incredible and unique college. At no other elite institution in the world can an 18-year-old undergraduate student sit together in class with a 28-year-old former entrepreneur, artist, Navy Seal, politician, or refugee to the extent that this is possible here at Columbia. Dean Awn, from his first day as dean, recognized these remarkable dynamics, and how enriching it is to have these dynamics within the classroom. Yet he recognized, too, the challenges non-traditional students face. Many have been out of academia for 10 or more years, or have overcome remarkable obstacles in order to be here. The transition can be difficult, and new students often struggle with doubt, the infamous “impostor syndrome”. Dean Awn thrived on addressing these challenges. He embraced new students, and breathed
confidence into their being. He reminded us that we belong at Columbia. Not only because of the obstacles we have overcome, or because we have incredible or unique backgrounds (though these are important parts of our stories and of who we are). He told us, rather, that we belong because we are exceptional and capable. He so clearly communicated this message to those of us who had doubts, that we believed him. And because we believed him, we walked into our classrooms, year after year, and proved him right.

Dean Awn’s love for the students and administrators at the School of General Studies created a warm community, of which he was the heart and soul. Students found out about his passing late in the morning on Monday, February 18th. By 4:00pm, the GS Lounge was filled with students and alumni who had come together to share stories about him, and about how he had impacted their lives. Story after story was told in which he had looked a student in the eye and found just the right words to help resolve their problem, to guide them onto the next step of their academic journey, or to find the confidence they needed. And yet the many students and alumni in that room were but a drop in an ocean of students he interacted with - and changed forever - during the course of his career. All of us at Columbia - the students of General Studies, the administrators with whom he worked, the Senators with whom he interacted during his decade + in the University Senate, and many more besides - are blessed to have been able to know him and learn from him for as long as we did. His passing is a great loss. Yet I know that he would want us to wipe our tears, to clear our minds of grief, as much as this is possible, and to push on. Dean Peter J. Awns incredible legacy is forever secured, yet his books, his beloved books, await us still.

Thank you.

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